ROOM FOR ALL AT THIS TABLE

October 4, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 25:6-9
Luke 14:15-24

"Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled
-Luke 14:23b(RSV)

Not very much penetrates from the outside when we are at a cottage beside the ocean. We do not mean to withdraw. It's just that the only newspaper conveniently available is the Shallote, North Carolina Times, and its vision of the world is both comfortable and limited and rarely exceeds the price of tobacco at the local auctions and the Lion's Club Fried Chicken Festival. The Shallote Times will also tell you about the tides and how hot it's going to be and that is pretty much the information you need. A thirty minute ride to get a Chicago or New York newspaper, I concluded long ago, is rarely worth the effort. Either nothing has changed much, or things are so bad one is happier in ignorance. So nothing much intrudes.

This year something did. An event happened that penetrated - my mind, heart, spirit. On July 31 there was a riot in Mecca. Four hundred people were killed. The four hundred were Shiite Moslems. They were in Mecca for religious reasons, a holy pilgrimage. The Shiite response to this massacre has been to demand revenge, death... for the Sunnis, the sect they hold responsible, the Saudi Arabians and, of course, the United States.

That shattered the peace for me. I couldn't forget it - and still can't. Part of the reason that particular incident got to me is that sitting in a rocking chair watching the tide go out one becomes mellow. One sees something of the unity and wholeness and harmony of creation. This place works. Tides go in and out. Shorelines expand and retract. Moisture evaporates here and falls there. Oxygen, carbon dioxide, plankton, seaweed, fish. It's a very good system. Sitting in the rocking chair it is very clear that we are messing up this place. We throw a wrench into the gears. We violate the harmony. And then... even more unthinkable thoughts. Religion, which claims to know God and the nature of our relationship with God keeps producing things like that riot, keeps showing up at the scene as it were, sometimes holding the coats, sometimes holding a machine gun, but always there, assuring the ones doing violence that God will be pleased.

And for me, whose business, after all, is religion, comes the unthinkable question. Are we part of the solution, or are we part of the problem? Would the world be a better place without any religion except ours? When I think it would be better if everyone was Christian, I think of Belfast where everyone is Christian, where in the name of God and God's son Jesus Christ, and Christ's church, people have been hating and killing consistently for centuries... Do you ever think like this? Do you ever wonder whether or not religious passion is a major factor in the violence that afflicts creation? Do you ever agonize - or weep even - over the tragedy in that?

The Mecca riot got to be because one of my summer reading projects was Hans Kung's new book, Christianity and The World Religions. It is a substantial piece of work, not conducive to reading in bed before you nod off. So I gave it some prime, early morning time at the beach. Kung is Professor of Theology at the University of Tubingen. He is a Roman Catholic. He writes prolifically and he is equally distressing to the Vatican and to both the far left and far right of Protestantism - which is about where a good theologian ought to be. His new book is brave. He observes... "The most fanatical, the cruelest political struggles are those that have been colored, inspired and legitimized by religion." [p. 440]

Then he calls for a fresh new start, a new ecumenism. Kung says it's no big deal when Presbyterians talk to Methodists, or Protestants to Catholics. It is important when Christians and Moslems and Buddhists Hindus sit down a talk to each other.

Kung does not hold religion responsible for war, violence and destruction. But he does demonstrate that religion, more often than not, has been an ally, has become an instrument of that flaw in our humanity which has made us, this side of Eden, so much more efficient at killing than giving life, so much more eager to build bombs than hospitals.

The flaw is in our character. Let's call it tribalism. Human community seems to be built, not on love and cooperation and our common humanity, but on a threat from the outside. We need someone with whom to compare ourselves favorably in order to have self-identity. Apparently we need a "them" in order to be "us"... family, tribe, clan, race, nation... Hatfield's and McCoy's, Irish and English, Protestant and Catholics, Purdue and Indiana. It never ceases to amaze me that otherwise rational lawyers, teachers, doctors in Columbus Ohio, my dear old friends, really believe that people who live in Ann Arbor are ugly, mean and hateful. Now, that's fun and I have been known to indulge, but it is related to "us and them," our need for someone who is evil to make us feel good and proud about ourselves. And when it connects with religion - and religious passion, it gets mean, and when it owns a gun people start dying.

So the unthinkable has truth to it. God forgives us but we are and have been part of the problem.

It does not have to be that way. Perhaps one our most important tasks is to keep alive the rumor that it doesn't have to be this way. There is an alternative another way to think and behave. The alternative

begins in conversion - away from the religious exclusivism we have been enjoying.

The conversion - to which I refer - is a turning, in openness and receptivity, to an idea that was expressed by Jesus, an idea which he embodied.

He was a dinner guest, one time, at the home of a wealthy man and he committed the serious faux pax of telling his host that the next time he has a dinner party he should invite some poor people, some cripples and lepers...

You're at a fancy table, linen table cloth, crystal, silver. The help is hovering around, and at the end of the lobster bisque, between the white and the red wine, someone turns to the host and says, "Say - next time, why don't you invite a bag lady, and an AIDS victim and a wino?" Everyone gasps and hopes that someone at the table will say something to make it okay, like "Wasn't Sir Georg's treatment of the Mozart elegant last night?" - which is exactly what happened. Some well meaning soul, in desperation, raised his glass and said: "Here's to everyone who will eat like this in heaven." And just as they all heaved a sigh of relief and raised their glasses - here he comes again.

One time a man gave a party and sent out invitations. And when his guests accepted he made arrangements. On the day of the party his servants slaughtered the prize lamb - and then went to the guests and said, "Come now. The banquet is ready." It's time now to straighten your tie, put on your makeup, grab a cab and go. But no - now they start dropping out. In Arabic culture what these folk do is never done: in some places, to not honor an invitation which you have already accepted is a declaration of war. And the excuses are absolutely ridiculous... as silly as you telling me you'll be there for dinner and at the last minute phone to say, "Sorry - can't make it - just bought a house in Lake Forest over the telephone and thought I'd better drive out and see it" ... "Sorry - something came up - I got married this morning and we'll be on our honeymoon - forgot about it when I said I'd be there." These are not legitimate excuses.

The host is insulted, offended, deeply, irrevocably. His response? Get more guests. Go out into the streets and get them. It doesn't matter who they are. What matters is that my table is ready. The banquet must go on. Every seat must be full. Go get more guests. This is a radical story. Jesus knew what was going on around that table. Those people were playing "them and us." They had made their religion into yet another way to separate themselves from "them."

Jesus' story embodies the most powerful and important idea in the Bible:

> "On this mountain the Lord of hosts
> will make for <u>all</u> peoples a feast...
> And the Lord will destroy on this mountain
> the veil that is spread over all the nations
> And the Lord will swallow up death... and wipe
> away tears from all faces." (Isaiah 25:6 8)

Do you hear it? The world has never heard that clearly. But can you hear it? A feast for all peoples - a banquet, a joyful happy reunion of the human family. It is God's agenda for this diverse, multi-colored, pluralistic miracle called the human family. Sometimes I think God's saddest moments occur when religious people forget that vision. Sometimes I think God chooses others to say what is our job to say.

Listen to the scientists, who tell us that the world, the universe, is inter-connected in ways we are only beginning to understand. Astrophysics, for instance, teaches The Butterfly Effect, which now knows that a butterfly moving across a field in northern Illinois is putting in motion forces that are measurable in the far reaches of the universe. [See Madelein L'Engle, A Stone For A Pillow, p. 42.]

Or listen to Lewis Thomas talk lyrically about the world as a single cell, an organism whose life is delicately balanced.

Or listen to medicine tell us that the name for an independent, autonomous cell, unrelated to the other cells, going its own way with righteous self-assurance - is malignancy.

It is time now for the alternative. It is time - in human history for God's people to forget the foolishness of provincialism, to move over the walls of separation which reinforce the venerable games of "them and us." It is time for God's people to reclaim their oldest tradition - a vision of creation based on God's universal love and the harmony, peace, reconciliation and communion which grow out of it.

It begins when we ponder the banquet to which we are invited. It begins when we understand about ourselves that we exclude other people because of fear that we might not be included: that prejudice is always based on fear: that bigotry - racial, sexual, religious, national, is always based on fear and insecurity about one's self...

And so this is not, finally, an intellectual argument to convince you to think more charitably about Muslims and Catholics and all the people who make you uncomfortable. It is an invitation to come to the table to which you have been invited.

It is devastating to be - not wanted, not included, rejected. And at a level so deep within us that we really don't have much access to it, we build defenses and buy insurance against that eventuality... Moralities that will make us feel good about ourselves -

political ideas that will confirm
our righteousness,

religious concepts that will assure us
of our correctness -

a whole system designed to make sure we are "us" and not "them." A system designed to include us at the banquet table...

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And it is at that level that you and I need to hear some Gospel. We are included. We are invited. There is a place for us at the table.

There is a joyful celebration of God's love for you and me and the whole wide world, at which we are welcome, and our conversion commences when we drop what we are doing, drop what we are hiding behind, and come to the place God has for us at the table.

It is World Communion Sunday. It is, perhaps, the best idea we ever had.

Lord of all nations, creator of all cultures, maker of the wonderful diversity of the human race, join us today - in spirit - with brothers and sisters everywhere. Join us - in bread and wine with those who share faith with us. And join us with those who do not share faith, who see from a different angle. Break through to us - so that we might know the oneness of your love - and the joy of the banquet you have prepared for all people - through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.